

‘It’s Wrong. But It’s Right’: The Phenomenon of Agapic Breakups

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ABSTRACT

Previous theories of relationship breakdown have emphasized dissatisfaction and onset of relational problems, overlooking altruistic motivations for breakups. This study delves into the phenomenon of agapic breakups, where the breaking up of the relationship is a seemingly altruistic act motivated by the intention of protecting one’s partner from some anticipated future harm. Through qualitative analysis of textual narratives from novels, the study unravels key themes and codes intrinsic to agapic breakups. Findings reveal that in agapic breakups, individuals tend to prioritize their partner's future happiness over their own desires, often sacrificing the relationship itself for the well-being of their partner. This altruistic decision to terminate the relationship is so complex that it blurs the boundaries between right and wrong where use of manipulative strategies to deny the partners their choice to stay or leave, is deemed appropriate if it serves the purpose of protecting them from future harm. The study prompts inquiries regarding fairness, consent, and respect for the partner's agency in interpersonal relationships, contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of interpersonal relationships and highlights the profound selflessness and commitment inherent in agapic breakups.

Keywords: *Decision-making, Breakups, Relationship dissolution, Altruism, Sacrifice*

Relationships hold a significant importance in people’s lives as they undeniably influence people’s health and subjective well-being at all stages in their lives (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Meijering, 2015). Most people when asked ‘What’s necessary for your happiness?’ say, before anything else, satisfying close relationships with friends, family and romantic partners (Berscheid, 1985).

Termination of a relationship, especially a romantic one has been linked to the feeling of sadness and depression among people (Mearns, 1991; Shulman et al., 2017). Considering their importance, a plethora of research has focused on the reasons behind the breakdown of a relationship. However, traditional theories of relationship dissolution often focus on factors such as dissatisfaction, conflict, and incompatibility as primary drivers behind the dissolution process (Knapp, 1978; Duck, 1982; Baxter, 1984; Lee, 1984).

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This study intends to explore the phenomenon of 'Agapic breakups' that focuses on the instances where the decision to terminate the relationship is a seemingly altruistic decision taken by a person to safeguard the well-being of their partner. The concept of agapic breakups draws inspiration from the Greek term "agape," which refers to selfless, unconditional love or altruism. Unlike traditional theories, agapic breakups posit that individuals may choose to end a relationship not out of dissatisfaction or personal gain but rather out of a selfless desire to protect their partner from potential future misery. Accounts of such cases have been found in several books and movies all over the world. For example, *More Than Forever* by Jay McLean, *The Best of Me* by Nicholas Sparks, *Happy Ever After Playlist* by Abby Jimenez, *Road Tripped* by Nicole Archer, *Second Chance Summer* by Morgan Matson, *Subtle Reminders* by D. J. Pierson, *Fifty First Dates* (Hollywood movie), *Neon Naege Banhaesseo* (Heartstrings- Korean TV series), *Mann* (Bollywood movie) etc. In these breakups, relational problems and dissatisfaction are not currently present in the relationship. Instead, people tend to foresee how their lives' current circumstances could become a hurdle in the happiness or well-being of their partner in the near future and somehow become convinced to unilaterally end the relationship, despite their own emotional attachment or desires. The decision to terminate the relationship is made unilaterally, often helped by creating a false narrative or withholding true reasons, thus robbing the other person of his/her choice to leave or stay in the relationship.

"It's wrong. But it's right." This line voiced by the female protagonist in the novel 'More Than Forever' by Jay McLean perfectly illustrates the complexity behind the decision making in such breakups accurately.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Interpersonal relationships play a central role in human experience, influencing individuals' emotional well-being, social functioning, and overall quality of life. At the heart of these relationships lies the intricate dynamics of attachment, intimacy, and communication, which shape the course of romantic partnerships and friendships alike. While much research has focused on the initiation and maintenance of relationships, the process of dissolution—when relationships come to an end—remains a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

Apart from traditional models of relationship dissolution based on dissatisfaction or relational problems, several theories such as social exchange theory, equity theory, and the investment model, have also tried to provide valuable frameworks for understanding the factors contributing to breakups. However, these theories often prioritize individual motivations and outcomes, such as dissatisfaction, conflict, and perceived costs and rewards, while overlooking instances where individuals may choose to end a relationship out of altruistic motives—to protect their partner from potential future misery.

This literature will explore the limitations of traditional theories in explaining altruistic relationship dissolution and to propose a new framework for understanding this phenomenon of Agapic Breakups.

Interpersonal Relationships and Relationship Dissolution

Interpersonal relationships are characterized by their dynamic nature, evolving over time in response to individual and relational factors. In traditional models of relationship dissolution, the emphasis is often placed on identifying early signs of problems and dissatisfaction as precursors to the breakdown of the relationship. These models typically highlight factors such as communication difficulties, unresolved conflicts, and unmet needs as contributing to the

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erosion of relationship satisfaction over time (Knapp, 1978; Duck, 1982; Baxter, 1984; Lee, 1984).

There are other theories that have also tried to provide an understanding of interpersonal relationship and their breakdown. For example, social exchange theory proposes that individuals engage in relationships based on the expectation of rewards and the avoidance of costs (Thibault & Kelly, 1959). Dissatisfaction arises when the perceived rewards of the relationship are outweighed by the costs, leading to the potential breakdown of the relationship. Similarly, equity theory posits that individuals strive for fairness and balance in their relationships, seeking to maintain a ratio of inputs and outcomes that is comparable to that of their partner. Perceived inequities, where one partner feels over-benefited or under-benefited, can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and potential dissolution (Austin & Walster, 1974; Walster et al., 1978). Another prominent theory in this domain is the investment model of relationship commitment which suggests that individuals' commitment to a relationship is influenced by three factors: satisfaction, investment, and alternatives. High levels of satisfaction and investment, coupled with low perceived alternatives, contribute to greater commitment and decreased likelihood of dissolution (Rusbult et al., 1998).

While these theories offer valuable insights into the factors contributing to relationship dissolution by focusing on individual motivations and outcomes, such as satisfaction, investment, and perceived alternatives, they may not fully account for instances where individuals choose to end a relationship out of altruistic motives—to protect their partner from potential future misery. While it is not uncommon for an individual in a romantic relationship to put his/her partner's needs before him/her, the sacrifices can be seen as part of nurturing the relationship which the individual eventually benefits from. In essence, a clear distinction could be made between “sacrificing for the relationship” and “sacrificing the relationship”.

Agapic Breakups represent a departure from the traditional frameworks of relationship dissolution, emphasizing selflessness and altruism as primary drivers of relationship endings. In these instances, individuals may unilaterally decide to terminate a relationship, not out of dissatisfaction or personal gain, but rather out of a genuine concern for their partner's well-being and happiness.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale behind studying Agapic Breakups lies in the recognition of the complexity and diversity of human relationships. While traditional theories offer valuable insights into common reasons for relationship dissolution, they may overlook instances where individuals prioritize their partner's well-being above their own happiness to the extent that they feel compelled to sacrifice the relationship itself.

This altruistic kind of breakups are often depicted in various media forms across the world. This study will use textual narratives from fictional books to understand the phenomenon of Agapic Breakups. Literary narratives are not just source of entertainment, they also serve a crucial function as they provide abstract, simplified, and compressed models or simulations of the social world we live in (Mar & Oatley, 2008). By looking the nature and characteristics of agapic breakups, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human relationships, the role of altruism in decision-making, and the potential implications for individuals' emotional well-being.

Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of Agapic Breakups and identify common themes and motifs in narratives depicting Agapic Breakups.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the phenomenon of Agapic Breakups. Qualitative methods are well-suited for investigating complex and nuanced phenomena, allowing for an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and motivations within their natural context.

Data Sources and Collection

After careful and systematic examination and identification of instances of sacrificing of the relationship in novels and other media, relevant textual material was collected from seven novels namely *More Than Forever* by Jay McLean, *Subtle Reminders* by D. J. Pierson, *The Best of Me* by Nicholas Sparks, *Happy Ever After Playlist* by Abby Jimenez, *Sempre Redemption* by J. M. Darhower, *Second Chance Summer* by Morgan Matson, and *Road-Tripped* by Nicole Archer. The process of data extraction was carried over a period of 3 months from June 2023 to August 2023. Examples of these kinds of breakups were also identified in other media forms like TV shows and movies, and although not analyzed using qualitative methodology, were used to support the findings from the analysis of textual data from novels.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done using a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on identifying themes, patterns, and insights within the narratives of Agapic Breakups. A qualitative content analysis focuses on the distinctive themes that depict the various interpretations of the phenomenon, rather than the statistical significance of specific texts or concepts (Zhang & Wildermuth, 2009)

Textual materials were systematically coded using a coding framework developed based on the research objective and relevant literature. Initial codes were generated through open coding to capture key themes and concepts present in the narratives. Coded data was organized into thematic categories representing common patterns and character motivations related to Agapic Breakups. Themes will be developed through iterative review and refinement of the coded data.

Regular discussions and consultations with peers and colleagues were carried out during the whole process to ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of textual data from various novels revealed several themes and codes related to agapic breakups, shedding light on the complex dynamics underlying these relationships. Table 1 presents the codes and themes that emerged from the data. In this section, the findings from this study are discussed so an understanding of the nature of agapic breakups can be made.

Emotional Complexity of Decision-Making

One prominent theme that emerged is the emotional complexity surrounding the decision-making process in agapic breakups. Characters grapple with conflicting emotions and moral

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dilemmas as they contemplate ending the relationship for the sake of their partner's well-being. A key pattern in Agapic Breakups is the recognition or anticipation of potential future misery for one's partner if the relationship continues. This theme reflects a deep understanding of the partner's needs, desires, and vulnerabilities, motivating the decision to end the relationship to prevent future harm.

The excerpt from "More than Forever" by Jay McLean vividly portrays the theme of anticipated future misery, providing a poignant glimpse into the emotional turmoil experienced by the characters as they contemplate the consequences of their decisions. In this passage, the girl envisions a future where the boy, consumed by regret and sadness, ultimately succumbs to hate as he reflects on what could have been.

"So one day the girl builds a time machine, but she doesn't join him in the past, she goes to the future. To where she sees the boy she fell in love with many, many years ago. And she sees his sadness. She sees him look into the room he designed just for her. She sees the frown that pulls on his lips when he glances at a single armchair. She sees him watching his friend's kids at little league, and wondering to himself what he did in life that was so wrong that he couldn't have that. Then she sees the way he looks at her, with so much held in regret, and sadness, and anger, because he couldn't have any of it. And one day, that regret and sadness and anger—they turn into hate. And the love they once had, the love that made their world spin, has turned into hate. So there they are; the boy in the past, falling in love with the girl. And the girl in the future, with the boy that can no longer love her."

The girl's fear of perpetuating heartbreak highlights the agonizing realization that their relationship may lead to inevitable pain and sorrow for her boyfriend in the future. She grapples with the idea that her present circumstances may ultimately result in a future filled with regret and longing for what could have been.

Similar pattern of thinking can be observed in this excerpt from "Subtle Reminders" by D. J. Pierson, where Brie expresses her fears to her mother about Joe's desire for a family, recognizing the potential for disappointment and regret if she cannot fulfill his expectations.

"He wants a family, Mom."

"That's horrible," she mocked.

I stopped and stared at her, wondering if she had listened to anything I said the last few days. "What if I can't give him the only thing he's ever talked about?"

"You're being ridiculous."

"Am I?"

"Yes! Joe loves you, Brie."

"He may think that now but, down the road, he'll look back and realize he missed out on so much. I won't do that to him."

"So you're not even giving him a choice?"

"No. He'll choose wrong."

Brie's apprehension stems from her belief that she may not be able to provide Joe with the family he desires, leading her to contemplate the possibility of ending the relationship to spare him from future pain and sorrow. Despite her mother's attempts to reassure her, Brie remains steadfast in her conviction that denying Joe the opportunity to choose is ultimately the right decision.

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This portrayal of anticipated future misery underscores the profound impact of love and sacrifice on individuals' decision-making processes. Brie's reluctance to subject Joe to potential disappointment and regret reflects the complexity of love and sacrifice, highlighting the intricate interplay between altruistic desires and ethical considerations. Similar observation was made in the study by Joo and Park (2017), where participants responded to hypothetical scenarios where they had to decide to save their partner by sacrificing themselves. It was seen that identity fusion, defined as a distinct type of relational bond that allows individuals to uphold their personal identity within the newly formed fused identity (Swann & Buhrmester, 2015), significantly predicted ultimate sacrifice among participants. The decision-making pertaining to sacrifices in these cases are dominated by intuition rather than deliberate decision-making processes (Swann et al., 2014; Rand and Epstein, 2014).

The characters' struggle to reconcile their present choices with the uncertain future adds depth to the exploration of Agapic Breakups, shedding light on the profound emotional stakes and complex decision making involved in matters of the heart.

Unilateral Decision-Making Process

A significant aspect of agapic breakups is the unilateral decision-making process, where one partner unilaterally decides to end the relationship often without consulting the other. This is aided through use of strategies such as withholding information or creating false narratives or undermining partner's agency to facilitate the breakup process. This is an essential aspect of agapic breakups as the characters are aware of the decision their partner would make given the choice. The use these manipulative strategies ensures that there is minimize resistance from the partner and ensure that the decision to end the relationship is carried out smoothly and unilaterally. This pattern can be observed in the previous discussion too when Brie decides that it's right to undermine Joe's agency because she believes that he will not make the right decision.

Similar pattern can be seen in "More than Forever" by Jay McLean, where the internal struggle faced by the protagonist is highlighted as she grapples with conflicting notions of right and wrong. In this passage, the protagonist expresses her belief that ending her relationship with Cameron is the right decision, despite the moral ambiguity of her actions.

"I can't do it, Lucas. I don't think I can be with him—not when I know how badly he wants kids." His eyes move to the sketch, now stained with my blood.

"You think maybe that's his choice, not yours?"

"You know Cameron," I mutter. "You know he's always going to stand by me, even when he shouldn't. He won't leave. I have to make him. I have to make him hate me so he gets what he deserves. It's wrong. But it's right."

The protagonist acknowledges Cameron's unwavering loyalty and love for her, recognizing that he would stand by her regardless of the circumstances. However, she feels compelled to end the relationship to spare him from potential misery, particularly in light of his strong desire to have children—a desire she cannot fulfill. Despite the internal conflict and the recognition that her actions may be perceived as morally questionable, the protagonist ultimately believes that ending the relationship is the right choice for both of them.

Sometimes, this unilateral decision making is aided by creating false narratives as seen in the book "Happy Ever After Playlist" by Abby Jimenez, where the male protagonist let his partner believe that he cheated on her so that she would not get the chance to make the choice

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to stay with him despite the danger that comes with being a relationship with him. The excerpt from the book provides insight into the unilateral nature of decision-making in Agapic Breakups, where one partner takes decisive action by withholding true reasons. In this passage, the protagonist grapples with the realization that he cannot provide his partner with the life she deserves, leading him to contemplate ending the relationship unilaterally.

She deserved it all and more.

And I could never give it to her.

I knew she'd never leave me. Her standing there was proof of it. She'd abandoned her painting, half-finished, to be here so I could keep dragging her around the country like luggage. And if I leveled with her, told her the truth about the danger she was in, she'd just say they didn't scare her and she wouldn't let them run her off.

I was nothing but an indentured servant. I'd never get away. But I wouldn't condemn her to one more dangerous minute of it.

The protagonist acknowledges his partner's unwavering loyalty and commitment to their relationship, recognizing that she would never leave him despite the dangers they face. However, he feels a sense of guilt and responsibility, knowing that he cannot offer her the safety and security she deserves. His decision to end the relationship is driven by a desire to spare his partner from further danger and hardship, even if it means sacrificing their relationship in the process. Despite his partner's willingness to stand by him, he feels compelled to make the unilateral decision to ensure her well-being.

Another example of this manipulation can be seen in other media like Korean series "Heartstrings," where Lee Shin hides his injury from Lee Gyu-won and breaks up with her by creating a false narrative to encourage her to pursue her dreams. Instead of revealing the truth, Lee Shin creates a false narrative about his lack of commitment to their relationship, believing that it's better for Lee Gyu-won to focus on her dreams and aspirations.

Agapic breakups are built on deceptive communication centred around what is known as an altruistic lie. Altruistic lies are falsehoods told solely for the benefit of others, often at the expense of the liar's own interests or well-being (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014). These lies stem from a selfless motive to protect or promote the welfare of another individual. Altruistic lies may be relevant in understanding the motivations and behaviors of individuals who unilaterally terminate relationships for the perceived benefit of their partner. Individuals in agapic breakups may engage in deceptive communication, such as withholding the true reasons for the breakup or fabricating narratives to protect their partner from emotional distress. These lies may be motivated by a desire to spare their partner's feelings, shield them from potential harm, or preserve their sense of self-worth.

The findings highlight the ethical implications of choice deprivation in agapic breakups, raising questions about fairness, consent, and respect for the partner's agency. The use of strategies to manipulate the breakup process, such as withholding information or creating false narratives, prompts questions about the ethical implications of prioritizing one partner's well-being over the other's agency.

Altruistic Motivation for Breakup

Agapic breakups at their core are guided by altruistic motives which are defining characteristics in these breakups. Characters are seen to be motivated by a genuine concern for their partner's future happiness and well-being, leading them to make the difficult decision

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to end the relationship for their partner's sake. This theme is exemplified in numerous literary and cinematic works where characters make sacrifices for the sake of their loved ones. Previous passages have touched on how different characters were motivated by their concern about their partner's wellbeing and chose to spare their partner from the future harm and suffering by breaking up with them.

Similarly, in "Second Chance Summer" by Morgan Matson, Taylor breaks up with her boyfriend, Henry, upon learning about her father's terminal illness, fearing that he would sacrifice his own aspirations to support her through the difficult time.

In "Heartstrings", Lee Shin decides to hide his wrist injury from Lee Gyu-won, fearing that it would prevent her from seizing the opportunity to become a star abroad, thereby selflessly breaking up with her. Additionally, in the Bollywood movie "Mann," Priya sacrifices her love for Karan upon discovering her disabling injury, believing that being with her would only bring him pain and suffering. These examples highlight the depth of altruistic motives in Agapic Breakups, where individuals prioritize the well-being of their partners above their own desires.

Self-sacrifice is not uncommon in interpersonal relationships. It's important to differentiate between the daily sacrifices that individuals make within relationships and the ultimate sacrifice involved in terminating the relationship. While daily sacrifices may contribute to long-term relationship benefits, the ultimate sacrifice of ending a relationship cannot be associated with any potential personal gain for the individual making the sacrifice. Individuals who make impulsive decisions, whether due to dispositional factors or time pressure, often fail to consider the consequences of their actions (Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009).

In agapic breakups, sacrifice takes on a unique dimension wherein individuals are not sacrificing for the betterment of the relationship, but rather sacrificing the relationship itself for the well-being of their partner. While sacrificing one's own self-interest for a partner is often seen as a significant factor in maintaining satisfying couple relations, the nature of sacrifice in agapic breakups differs in that it involves relinquishing the relationship entirely to ensure the happiness and welfare of the partner. Previous research has extensively examined the impact of sacrifice on couple relations, highlighting its role in fostering greater satisfaction and stability in relationships (Impett, et al, 2005; Impett et al., 2013; Stanley et al., 2006; Van Lange et al., 1997). However, in the context of agapic breakups, the act of sacrificing the relationship signals an unparalleled level of commitment and selflessness, as individuals prioritize their partner's well-being above their own desires or the continuation of the relationship. This type of sacrifice goes beyond traditional notions of sacrificing for the relationship itself and underscores the profound depth of care and concern individuals may have for their partners in agapic breakups.

In real world, how agape breakups operate is a whole different matter altogether. An argument can be made that fiction is inspired by reality and it, in turn, have the potential to influence real life beliefs of people (Prentice & Gerrig, 1999; Mar & Oatley, 2008). When considering the influence of fiction on real-world beliefs, the enduring persuasive impact of fictional narratives, known as the "absolute sleeper effect," suggests that the persuasive effects of false information within fictional stories persist over time, as demonstrated in an experiment where participants exposed to both true and false assertions in a fictional narrative exhibited significant short-term persuasion, with even greater effects observed after

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a two-week assessment delay (Appel & Richter, 2007). However, it cannot be denied that the characters in novels and movies are not as flawed as people in real world are. In real world, individuals could have less selfless motives behind agapic breakups like avoiding the feeling of guilt from ruining someone's life.

Nevertheless, agapic breakups are interesting phenomenon and by studying it gives we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of altruistic relationship dissolution and its implications for individuals' well-being and interpersonal dynamics.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the study provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of agapic breakups, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged: The study primarily analyzed textual data from a limited number of novels. While these novels were carefully selected to represent a diverse range of narratives and characters, the findings may differ in some aspects in other instances of agapic breakups in real-life relationships. The analysis focused exclusively on fictional representations of agapic breakups in novels. While this approach allowed for a rich exploration of themes and patterns, it may not fully capture the complexity and nuances of real-life relationship dynamics.

As with any qualitative analysis, the interpretation of textual data is inherently subjective and subject to be influenced by the researcher's perspectives and biases. Despite efforts to maintain rigor and objectivity, the findings may be influenced by the researcher's preconceptions and interpretations.

Building on the insights gained from this study, several avenues for future research can be recommended. Future research could employ mixed-methods approaches to empirically validate the findings of this study. Quantitative surveys or interviews could be conducted to explore the prevalence and characteristics of agapic breakups in real-life relationships. The role of personality factors like unmitigated communion and relational self-efficacy can be also be studied to shed light on factors pertaining to agapic breakups.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the nature and characteristics of an agapic breakup. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the nuanced nature of agapic breakups, highlighting the emotional complexity, unilateral decision-making processes, and altruistic motivations underlying these relationship dynamics.

The themes identified in this study underscore the intricate interplay between personal desires, relational dynamics, and ethical considerations in agapic breakups. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of agapic breakups and their implications for individuals' well-being and relational dynamics. By continuing to explore and investigate the complexities of agapic breakups, we can better support individuals navigating the challenges of love, loss, and selflessness in relationships.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Themes and codes from the data

Themes	Codes
Emotional Complexity of Decision-Making	Anticipated Future Misery
	Ethical Consideration of Wrong and Right
Unilateral Decision-Making Process	Choice deprivation
	Withholding Information or Creating False Narratives
Altruistic Motivation for Breakup	Concern for Partner's Future Happiness
	Disregarding self-interests and happiness